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Letter dated 25 October 2016 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit to you herewith a letter from the women of the High Negotiations Committee of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, dated 24 October 2016 (see annex).

I should be most grateful if you would circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Matthew **Rycroft**

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Annex to the letter dated 25 October 2016 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

No conflict more directly affects women than the crisis in Syria. Since 2011, more than 16,000 Syrian women and girls have been killed. An estimated 8,614 Syrian women have been arrested and detained, many of whom have been subjected to sexual violence, torture and maltreatment in regime detention facilities. As the Security Council holds its annual debate on women and peace and security, it is vital that all steps be taken to protect Syrian women from the deliberate and indiscriminate violence perpetrated against them and to lay the foundation for a future democratic Syria, in which the rights of all Syrians, women and men, are both respected and protected.

As women of the High Negotiations Committee of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, we know well the challenges that confront all Syrians who dare to demand democracy, freedom and equality. Our members have been detained and in some cases tortured by Syrian regime personnel for exercising our fundamental and basic human rights. Like so many brave women across Syria, we have been driven from our homeland for our political activism. Our family members have been targeted and in some cases killed by the Syrian regime and its affiliated militias. Yet for all our grievances, our hardships reflect just some of the daily realities faced by millions of Syrian women in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, who confront relentless aerial attacks perpetrated by Assad and Russia, in the absence of civilian protection.

Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) calls upon "all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence" and "emphasizes the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls". To date, however, no measures have been employed to protect Syrian women or to hold perpetrators of war crimes against women to account. As a result, violence against Syrian women has reached epic proportions, with the world doing far too little to stop it.

Today, a Syrian woman is more likely to be displaced, detained, tortured or killed than she is to graduate college. A Syrian woman is more likely to die from indiscriminate aerial bombardment, than from cancer or heart disease. Women in besieged cities, like Aleppo, find themselves trapped, having to choose between feeding themselves and their children. In refugee camps, women and girls find themselves vulnerable to endangerment, impoverishment and insecurity, leading to growing rates of child marriage, sexual exploitation, trafficking and forced prostitution.

Yet as much as Syrian women have suffered throughout the course of the Syrian crisis, they are far from passive victims. As the violence across Syria increases, women are playing an increasingly prominent role in maintaining civilian life, spearheading local councils, leading search and rescue efforts, monitoring and documenting arbitrary detention and human rights abuses, heading households and

caring for their families, and championing Syrians' calls for democracy, accountability and protection.

Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) encourages "the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria". Syrian women participated in all rounds of the Geneva process, albeit not in the numbers we aspire to. Women shaped the platform of the High Negotiations Committee of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, securing a commitment from the Committee to ensuring that one third of all positions in a future transitional governing body are occupied by women. We engaged directly with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria and his gender adviser. We led initiatives to bring the release of arbitrarily-held detainees to the top of the Special Envoy's agenda and we drew attention to the unique plight of Syrian women in detention. We did so with the knowledge that the achievements we have made with respect to women's rights remain incomplete. Much more has to be accomplished if Syrian women are to be equal partners in the national pursuit of a democratic, inclusive and free Syria. But to achieve women's empowerment and equality in a future Syria, we must first have protection and safety in today's Syria.

Syrian women will not be free to vigorously pursue equality and freedom, so long as their immediate priority is to escape barrel bombs and avoid missiles. We cannot achieve the political and economic rights we aspire to, while our basic right to life and security is being decimated by a regime, which we did not elect, and a foreign government, which we did not invite to bomb our loved ones from the skies. Make no mistake: we, Syrian women, will not be in a position to achieve the emancipation or equality we demand, until we have the protection we need. That is why, as Syrian women and as Syrian leaders, we appeal to Member States to:

1. **Take urgent action to protect Syrian women from indiscriminate violence**, including by deterring the foremost killer of Syrian civilians, aerial bombardment. A nationwide no-bomb zone, enforced through naval assets in the Mediterranean, not boots on the grounds or planes in the air, would stop the deliberate targeting of Syrian women by Russia and Assad and create the pressure needed to bring Assad to the negotiating table, prepared to agree to a political transition.

2. **Hold perpetrators of war crimes to account**. Given the blockage at the Security Council, it is imperative that action be taken by Member States and the General Assembly to bring justice to victims of war crimes. Member States can work independently to apply national and universal jurisdiction to war crimes cases, while the General Assembly can secure justice by establishing a special tribunal and requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice.

3. **Secure access by independent monitors to all detention facilities in Syria**, including Assad's secret military facilities, where women and children are subjected to torture, sexual assault and starvation.

4. **Break the sieges** and end the starvation, which disproportionately affect women and children, including by authorizing airdrops to all besieged and hard-to-reach areas. We are past the point of last resort — it is imperative that all means be pursued now in order for aid to reach those most at risk.

5. **Strengthen targeted sanctions against the primary perpetrators of violence against Syrian women**: the Assad regime and Russia. Only when pressure is brought to bear on the parties most responsible for crimes against women, will the violence against women stop.

Your Excellency, the Security Council has long stressed its support for the participation of women in the United Nations-facilitated peace process. This is admirable, but it is insufficient. To truly stand with Syrian women, the Security Council must stand with our demands for protection, justice and sanctions. If the Security Council cannot unite in support of Syria's women, then it is incumbent upon Member States to act to uphold our most fundamental rights to live in peace, without fear of indiscriminate violence.

Hind **Kabawat**, Director of Interfaith Peacebuilding at the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University and member of the High Negotiations Committee

Bassma **Kodmani**, Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative and member of the High Negotiations Committee's negotiating team

Alise **Mofrej**, member of the High Negotiations Committee's negotiating team

Suheir **Atassi**, member of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the High Negotiations Committee